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## Experiential Learning in Kinesiology: A Student Perspective

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### Abstract

**Overview**—Service learning is a form of experiential learning that pairs academic educational experiences and community organizations to promote training, civic engagement, and meaningful service by students to their community. Kinesiology programs have moved toward increasing experiential and service learning options in health promotion for their students, but few have evaluated the student perceptions of these programs.

**Purpose**—The purpose of the current study was to conduct a qualitative evaluation of a service learning course for Kinesiology majors located in a low-income urban area.

**Methods**—Ten recent graduates of a department of Kinesiology were enrolled in focus groups, stratified by gender, facilitated by a graduate research assistant not affiliated with their school. Focus group discussions were audiotaped, transcribed and analyzed for themes.

**Results**—Nine themes were identified including: (1) Personal and professional experience, (2) decision to participate, (3) location decision, (4) self-efficacy, (5) perceptions of program members, (6) social interaction, (7) personal and program communication, (8) physical facilities and (9) program outcomes. Students positively evaluated the learning experience as valuable to their personal and professional development; noted changes in their perceptions of low-income communities and increases to self-efficacy and skill acquisition from the beginning to the end of the course; and observed significant needs and improvements in physical, emotional and social outcomes of community members.

**Conclusions**—This study demonstrated multiple and varied benefits of a service learning program for Kinesiology students. On-going evaluation of service learning programs in health promotion is needed to enhance student and community outcomes.

Kinesiology is a health-related discipline devoted to the study of human movement.

Undergraduate and graduate programs in this area are typically designed to provide students

with experiential learning in order to develop skills in conducting research and implementing exercise/fitness interventions with child and adult populations. Dewey (1938, p. 2) noted the merits of experiential learning, describing it as the “intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education”. Unlike traditional classroom settings that may be highly structured and therefore not representative of real world practice settings, experiential learning provides students with opportunities to learn in semi-structured situations to gain experience, reflect on observations, and apply knowledge. Experiential learning has become a common pedagogical approach for disciplines such as education, management, computer science, and medicine (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001). Incorporation in Kinesiology has increased in recent years being most popular in physical education/teacher education programs (Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez & Scott, 2009). Experiential learning activities vary widely from hands-on practice between students during classroom activities (e.g., learning to take accurate blood pressure readings) to collaboration with community or health organizations to provide students with exposure to the range of complexity of pediatric and adult health presentations (e.g., cardiac rehabilitation programs).

Service learning, as a form of experiential learning, has been envisioned to foster collaboration between students and community organizations with equal emphasis on service to the community and learning opportunities for students (Reynolds, 2009). Service learning has been conceptualized to include learning opportunities that take place in non-clinical environments, incorporation of reciprocal learning and reflection and promotion of social responsibility (Reynolds, 2009; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In this model, the interaction between students and community organizations and their constituents is designed to have mutual benefit for all parties, where students serve specific roles within the context of the community organization (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Service learning courses in Kinesiology provide practical settings for experiential learning because students can meet the physical activity needs of community members by delivering fitness programs in their neighborhoods, return to campus to reflect on experiences as part of their academic coursework, and eventually apply learned knowledge and skills in professional settings (Cutforth, 2000). Service learning experiences are unique in that they are designed to fulfill a need within the community while raising awareness, developing good citizenship, and building knowledge and skills in students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Further, growth of the student as a whole person is an intended goal of service learning courses.

Student evaluation of service learning programs is a critical element in the on-going development of these courses. Although the number of experiential and service learning courses within the discipline of Kinesiology is rising nationally, few evaluation studies have been conducted to assess the ways in which students make meaning of the experiences within these courses. In the past decade, an increasing number of articles have described various experiential- and service-learning programs (Watson, Hueglin, Crandall & Einsenmen., 2002; Peterson, Judge & Pierce, 2012; Hendricks & Miranda, 2003) and recommended the use of such programs (Bishop, 2007; Johnson, 2010; Cutforth, 2000) indicating a growing interest in this approach to teaching within Kinesiology curricula. However, only one study has evaluated service learning from the student perspective within the discipline of physical education (Coetzee, 2011). In this study, the authors conducted a

phenomenological qualitative study of structured and unstructured written reflections from 64 third-year undergraduate students and in-person interviews to determine students' perceived gain of competencies after participating in a community service learning course as part of the Human Movement Science program. This study found that students attained communication, management, creativity, group dynamic and people skills, competencies that are critical for the implementation of health promotion programs (Coetzee, 2011).

In order to address the paucity of evaluation studies of student experience in service learning courses in Kinesiology, our team conducted a qualitative evaluation of the student experience of a service learning course at Indiana University Purdue University in Indianapolis (IUPUI) that is required of all undergraduate students majoring in Kinesiology who were placed in a community fitness program. In this paper, we briefly describe the program, the methodology for this qualitative assessment and themes identified from the student focus group transcripts.

## The PARCS Program

In 2004, Physically Active Residential Communities and Schools (PARCS) was created as a community-based exercise program to provide inner-city community residents in Indianapolis with exercise opportunities. Service learning at PARCS is required by all IUPUI Kinesiology students majoring in Exercise Science or Fitness Studies throughout their academic training (e.g., 200, 300, and 400-level courses). PARCS promotes physical fitness and wellness at the community level by engaging with adults and youth who are community residents through a collaboration of Department of Kinesiology, Eskenazi Health's Healthy Me program (a Federally Qualified Health Center that refers overweight and obese patients to PARCS) and the Indianapolis Public Schools system (serves as PARCS program sites). The PARCS program is staffed by undergraduate students from the department of Kinesiology. Each semester, approximately 200 undergraduate students provide fitness assessments, personal training, group exercise instruction, and social support at PARCS for academic credit. Each student is required to work 8 to 30 hours per semester, depending on the course level, and report learning outcomes in the form of reflection papers to fulfill course requirements.

Since PARCS began, the program has been filling a gap that local fitness centers and schools have not been able to provide due to limitations in funding and time in low-resourced communities. Through PARCS, students are able to gain knowledge and skills in fitness instruction in the context of real-world settings. Many PARCS adult participants suffer from obesity and other comorbid conditions and are taught healthy behaviors through their participation in the program.

Because PARCS was developed to meet the teaching and learning needs of both university faculty and students as well as a health need for community members, evaluation research was not historically performed beyond conventional Likert scale course evaluations. In 2010, the PARCS program partnered with the Indiana University School of Medicine Diabetes Translational Research Center to conduct a 360-degree program evaluation of PARCS. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences and perspectives of

students who completed the PARCS service-learning courses and to gain an understanding of the perceived benefits and challenges of experiential learning pedagogy in Kinesiology. This study was reviewed and approved by the IUPUI Institutional Review Board.

## Methods

### Research Design

This research was conducted using a phenomenological viewpoint (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A qualitative focus group methodology was used to elicit the cognitive and emotional elements of this learning experience. The interdisciplinary research team included an Associate Professor who is a Ph.D. Clinical Psychologist, a Ph.D. student with a MPH, an Associate Professor in Kinesiology with an Ed.D., and a Kinesiology-trained Exercise Physiologist and Associate Professor in the Indiana University Center for Aging Research.

### Sample

This study used stratified purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) where the target population was students majoring in Kinesiology who had completed one or more upper-level (300- or 400-level) service learning courses in the PARCS program. This design was selected to identify key samples of student informants about the PARCS program from the student perspective and to preserve homogeneity of perspectives by gender (Patton, 2002). These courses can only be taken during the third, or final year of study. Most Kinesiology majors choose to fulfill this course requirement in their senior year. As such, the target population for recruitment to participate in the focus groups was senior-level or recent graduates of the Kinesiology program. To be included in the study, students needed to complete a PARCS experience in a 300- or 400-level class in the spring or fall of 2010 or spring of 2011. Data collection occurred from May-June 2011.

Per the IRB, students currently enrolled or still required to enroll in a PARCS course were not permitted to participate in the study in order to protect them from any perceived coercion by the faculty involved in the research and to reduce potential response bias in the data generated by such concerns. A recruitment email was sent to current students who had completed the service learning courses and recent alumni (graduated within 3 years) inviting them to participate in focus groups. Emails were sent from the Kinesiology Department list-serve that reaches all Kinesiology students and recent alumni. Alumni who interact with this list-serve are typically within one year of graduation. The same message was posted on 400-level service learning OnCourse web sites in order to reach students who had already completed prerequisite service learning in 200 and 300 level courses and were near completion of the 400-level courses. Recruitment flyers were also placed throughout the Kinesiology department office and disseminated in all 400 level course classrooms, likely reaching N~100 students. Interested students were asked to contact a study research assistant to determine eligibility. Students were compensated \$20 for their time.

### Data Collection

Focus groups were held on campus. Focus groups were stratified by gender in order to maximize student candor and comfort in describing their experience (Patton, 2002). Focus

groups were led by gender-matched graduate students (KA - female and KM - male). Focus group facilitators and assistant facilitators were trained in qualitative methods by one of the study principal investigators (MdG). Each facilitator had training in exercise physiology and had familiarity with the structure and format of the PARCS program and student coursework associated with it. Digital audio recordings were transcribed and ID numbers were assigned to each participant to de-identify responses to faculty coders (NK and BC) who may have a former and current mentoring relationship with the students.

A total of 10 ( $N = 8$  females and  $N = 2$  males) participated in the focus groups. Two female focus groups ( $N = 4$ ,  $M$  age = 22.3,  $SD = 0.96$ ;  $N = 4$ ,  $M$  age = 23.8,  $SD = 0.5$ ) and one male focus group ( $N = 2$ ,  $M$  age = 24.5,  $SD = 3.5$ ) were conducted over five weeks. The focus groups facilitators were not instructors or graduate assistants of the service learning course or key stakeholders of the PARCS program.

Focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group session, study participants were given a complete description of the study. Next, written informed consent was obtained. Study participants were then asked to complete a demographic survey. The focus groups were semi-structured where the facilitator began with pre-determined questions (see attached interview protocol;  $N=15$  questions) about the student experience at PARCS and followed the discussion to ask follow-up questions to stimulate discussion and explore new themes nominated by group members. A sample of the core stem questions posed to each focus group are shown in Appendix A.

### Data analysis

All focus groups were audio recorded, and an assistant facilitator attended the focus groups to take written notes of participant responses to validate the audio recordings. Audio recordings were electronically saved on a secure server and later transcribed verbatim and de-identified for data analysis by removing all references to student names and assigning 3-digit identification numbers (first digit for gender; next 2 digits for order of appearance across transcripts) for each speaker for each speech. The lead research assistant (KA) reviewed all transcriptions for accuracy. Final transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis followed by open, axial and selective coding to integrate and refine categories.

Three researchers (MdG, NK, KA) developed codes based on emerging themes, which were discussed and refined in team meetings. Table 1 compares initial themes to final themes identified by the team. To examine coding reliability, the researchers independently coded the three interviews and compared their results in two phases. During phase one, the coding of the interviews were discussed until agreement on the meaning and the application of each code was established. In phase two, two researchers (KA and MdG) coded all transcripts using MAXQDA 11. Inter-coder agreement was calculated for all three interviews as the frequency of a code appeared in each coder's version of the document. When inter-coder agreement was low, the two researchers addressed coded segments that did not agree and re-coded accordingly. Final inter-coder agreement for the interviews ranged from 89–91%.

## Results

Nine final themes (see Table 2) were identified including: (1) Personal and professional experience, (2) decision to participate, (3) location decision, (4) self-efficacy, (5) perceptions of program members, (6) social interaction, (7) personal and program communication, (8) physical facilities and (9) program outcomes. A description of each theme and representative quotes are presented below.

### Personal and Professional Experience

This theme was defined as student construction of the utility and value of participation in the PARCS program vis a vis personal growth or professional development. Students identified that the service-learning course enabled them to gain ‘real-life experience’ by working in a community-based exercise program. For example, when asked about some of the benefits they found in their experience, Student 206 stated, “I think it’s an opportunity to get some real-life experience outside of the classroom working with real people.” Students identified the PARCS experience as broadening their exposure to adults representing a range of ages, health presentations and socioeconomic backgrounds that they assessed as more representative of their future clientele than fellow students with whom they have engaged in other training activities. Students assessed that the structure and clientele of the PARCS program were reflective of future professional practice settings and that interaction with these clients would prepare them for success in professional practice beyond their program.

Students described the benefits of ‘real-life experiences’ as helping them learn how to effectively communicate and apply their knowledge. Students identified the training experience as promoting independence, self-reliance and creating an environment in which the tasks to be performed were dynamic and changing within and between client interactions. Student 200 said:

”You had to apply your knowledge instead of working with people that you work with all the time that knew exactly what you were saying. So, you actually had to know what was going on instead of relying on other people to help you out.”

Another student (202) stated, “It also gives you experience to learn how to adapt and think on your feet.”

Students also described interpersonal and professional communication developing skills through the service-learning experience that they were unable to cultivate in the classroom. Student 200 stated, “That’s something that you can’t really teach in the classroom is how to care for somebody.” Another student (206) said:

“Having the one-on-one situations and teaching group [fitness] classes is good because when I go for my profession – I’m going to be an occupational therapist – I feel like our program over other [programs] where students don’t have as much experience working with people gives [us] an advantage to be more comfortable working with one-on-one situations.”



Students noted that they felt they would have a competitive advantage in applying for graduate programs as a result of their PARCS service learning experience and the development of interpersonal and professional skills.

### Decision to Participate

Students were queried about the way they learned about the PARCS service learning courses and what guided their decision to participate in the courses. Many students identified that their decision to participate in the service learning course resulted from the academic requirement to take the course for their degree. Student 208 explained, “I went through it just because [it is] of one of the classes we had to take through [name of university].” Other students were influenced by their peers who had completed the course as stated by student 204 who said, “I think one of my friends had done it the semester before and that’s why I picked it.”

Some students decided to continue to participate in service-learning beyond the course requirement. For example, Student 205 stated, “I heard about it my freshman year in Intro [Introduction to Exercise Science]. It was the second class that we did...and then I started volunteering after that.” Another student (209) explained, “I also volunteered the rest of the semester, and then all of the second semester. I’m currently volunteering right now, and I will be there through all of next semester too.” Students identified the role of positive peer evaluation of the experience and the desire to continue to be engaged with clients and the training experience beyond the requirements of degree program as components of their decision to participate in the program.

### Location Decision

Students were queried about the logistical considerations of participating in a placement program that required them to leave the campus and enter low-income neighborhoods where the high schools hosting the PARCS program were located. Students identified that proximity of their placement site to campus and their own housing were important considerations. Student 206 explained, “I picked the place [PARCS location] closest to campus....it was convenience but also the only one that fit my schedule.” Another student (209) explained, “[Location] had a real big influence. I wanted to stay pretty close to where I lived and it made it convenient to only live 5 minutes away from or drive 5 minutes away from where I live.”

Students also felt it was important for the location and hours they worked to be compatible with other classes and extracurricular activities such as athletic teams or employment. Student 208 explained, “[Location] influenced [my decision] because I had to pick an evening I could work it around a practice schedule from [name of university]. So, any time during the evening that I didn’t have class was basically when I had to choose, and I couldn’t do anything on the weekends either.” Another student (207) said, “I just basically had to structure the location of when...the time I went to PARCS around class schedule and work schedule so location wasn’t a huge determinate it was basically where can I go at this time.”

Evident in these statements are a number of considerations articulated by students. Students were conscious of the amount of commuting time that would be required in order to travel to and from their chosen PARCS placement site. Students were also mindful of this training experience in the context of a variety of additional academic and leisure activities in which they were concurrently engaged including extramural athletic commitments, other course work and outside employment.

### Self-Efficacy

This theme was defined as student familiarity with the socioeconomic context of the training settings (i.e. low-income neighborhoods and their residents) and confidence in their capacity to function in the training setting. Students identified changes in their perceived self-efficacy over the course of their service learning experience. Early in the experience, students expressed hesitancy and anxiety as they approached their PARCS placement in an unfamiliar environment. For example, Student 207 explained, “I was a little scared. I started driving and the location of it was a little scary...” Another student (204) expressed, “I was kind of nervous just because I had never been there. I’m not from Indianapolis. I had no idea what was going to happen while I was there.”

Embedded in these responses was an acknowledgement of a lack of familiarity with the socioeconomic context they were entering. Students articulated assumptions and worries about personal safety that they associated with low-income urban environments. Students acknowledged that the assumptions they held about risk and safety were dispelled as they became a member of the PARCS community. For example, one female student (201) stated, “I never really had a situation where I felt terribly unsafe but I was always aware that I was in a little less safe area, and when participants [would] leave or they were the last ones, they would ask to walk you out...but I never really felt unsafe.” Students identified a change in their perspective vis a vis community members moving from ‘otherness’ (i.e. people who are fundamentally different from me) to a stance of empathy and caring for the burdens and difficulties in the lives of their clients (see Perceptions of Participants below).

Students also questioned their ability and preparation to work with an at-risk population. Student 204 said:

“I think maybe taking a class [in] the different diseases associated with obesity or exercise induced [outcomes], because I think that it would have been good for us to know if someone has really high blood pressure, what are some things that you should not do. Or what if someone has diabetes that is not controlled? What are some things that might put them over the edge or what are signs if they’re starting to get really low [blood sugar]?”

Students noted that they recognized the limitations in their experience and articulated a sense of responsibility for responding in a clinically appropriate manner in the context of their role as a fitness instructor.

Students noted changes in their self-efficacy to function as fitness professionals over time. A female student, 203, stated:



“For me personally, it helped build confidence level in training someone. We learned in class how to apply it but until you’re actually in a setting where you’re working one-on-one with a client or multiple clients, [it’s] not that you’re unsure, but you just haven’t been exposed to it so the exposure was definitely beneficial to me in getting over those fears.”

Students noted the experience aided in their understanding of the application of their skill set to a variety of medical and social presentations and the exposure to these presentations paired with the increasing ability to perform their role competently enhanced self-confidence and positive professional self-appraisal.

### Perceptions of Members

Another theme that emerged was the ways that students constructed their experience interacting with PARCS members. Students identified that perceived health, socioeconomic status, and knowledge of exercise program members influenced their service-learning experience. Students described members of the PARCS program as having poor health and low socioeconomic status. For example, Student 204 explained, “A lot of the people that we worked with did have poor health or [were] affected by it.” Student 209 stated, “[I] work[ed] with people that are obese or have a bunch of different diseases and help[ed] them change their lifestyle by getting them excited to exercise or to try and talk to them about eating healthier.” Another student (205) explained challenges experienced by some of the program members by saying,

“I think in the communities that we’re in, it’s really difficult because they are lower economically-based communities and sometimes those individuals, you know, they can’t, they don’t have child care.”

Students also suggested this population had limited knowledge about health and fitness. For example, Student 209 stated, “I feel like they all know that they want to lose weight but the way they go about it is not necessarily the right way a lot of times.”

Another student (200) explained:

“I think a lot of people just don’t know. It’s intimidating to go to a gym and they don’t know all the machines. They’ve never done it before and a lot of like the kids you know that’s how they grew up was eating McDonald’s and some kids don’t know that McDonald’s is not good for you. I guess lack of education and knowledge and just taking the first step to do it because everything costs money and most people don’t have extra money just to so they can go to the gym or something.”

Students articulated a process of increasing their awareness of the impact that lack of knowledge (i.e. healthy food choices) and resources such as child care and burden of disease had on the functioning and quality of life of community members. Embedded in this awareness was a sense of empathy for community members and a desire to assist in their journey to improve health and support their efforts to overcome environmental or economic limitations.

## Social Interaction

Across focus groups, students reported that social interactions, whether these were interactions with or between community members, was a significant part of their service learning experience. Students identified that they learned how to build interpersonal relationships in the context of their PARCS placement. Student 205 stated:

“I think it [PARCS placement] really helps with the relationship aspect, ... learning how to create a relationship with people and that’s part of the curriculum we can’t teach on campus, but it’s a huge part of what anybody does outside of the school or what they’re going to do afterwards.”

Another student (206) explained, “I felt like I built relationships with each and every one of the members that I saw regularly.” Student 201 described the ongoing relationships that were built by saying, “I honestly loved working with the adults, and I really built some good relationships with some of them. I still keep in contact with a couple in particular.” Student 206 explained social interactions between exercise program members by stating, “I think it’s really important to help build [a sense of] community in the community that they live in.”

## Personal and Program Communication

Communication about the expectations and functioning of the service-learning course as well as communication specific to the exercise program was a common theme identified by students. Students articulated a desire to have greater specificity for course expectations, the basis and process for conducting student evaluations that would influence course grades, and the schedule of activities to be performed at each site during a student’s assigned time at PARCS. Student 206 stated:

“I think there is sometimes a lack of structure...but that’s real life. I think a lot of times students are frustrated with that, because they don’t realize that those are some of the components you can’t control for. So I think that...maybe the communication around that could be frustrating as well.”

Students also expressed some dissatisfaction with the variability in the number of clients with which to work at each site and a desire to recruit and retain community members. Student 201 stated, “Maybe if you could have community events or be more active in like community centers or maybe churches even. Just to get our name out there but to make it even more a lifestyle.” Another student (203) explained, “I think...it would have been nice to see the clients more often and maybe they would [have] stuck to coming because I know, at some point, they kind of trickled off when the weather started getting colder.”

Comments in this theme indicated recognition of the incompatibility of two elements: the desire for the familiar structured training experience akin to classroom activities and the inherent differences in working in a community fitness facility in which number of clients, tasks to be performed and attrition vary on a weekly basis.

## Physical Facility

Physical facilities influenced the student experience of working in a community-based exercise program. Students expressed dissatisfaction with the number of locations

throughout the community of the PARCS program (N=3) and the perceived limited days (4 days per week) and hours (typically 4–6 per day) that the facilities were available to the adult members. Student 201 stated:

“PARCS is only open 4 days a week for these very few hours, and we can’t really hit everybody that needs it. So, if we’re trying to tell people they need to exercise almost every day of the week, but we’re only available to you 4 days a week, that’s kind of sending an off message...in a perfect world, we would be open all the time.”

Another student (207) explained, “There’s only limited locations. It’s not ideal for everyone.” In addition to access based on location and hours, students discussed availability and quality of the exercise equipment. Student 209 stated, “They’re [the PARCS fitness centers] limited on cardio equipment a lot of times, but the resistance training equipment, it’s all pretty nice.”

Comments consistent with this theme underscored student commitment to the mission of the program, recognition of the need for greater resources to be available to community members and a desire to have the physical environment (i.e. hours and locations of the program) be consistent with the recommendations that students believe would benefit their clientele (i.e. regular routine exercise).

### Program Outcomes

In this theme, students articulated their perceptions of the outcomes members gained as a result of their participation in the PARCS program. Students believed the program helped improve the health of members. For example, student 208 stated, “I think exercise is really important too because it like not only helps their health but makes them feel better about themselves, and if they feel better about themselves, they’re going to have a higher quality of life.” Another student (201) described that the program fills a gap not otherwise available to members by stating, “It’s not even that it’s just this community because diabetes and obesity and all that is present everywhere, but it’s just having the resources to be able to do something about it.”

Student 201 identified emotional and social outcomes of PARCS members by stating:

“You have the obvious physical benefits, then you have your improved mood and the social contact, because when you get all your regulars [members] in there, they know each other and they know what’s going on in their lives. They’re like their little support system for everybody.”

Students perceived improvements for community members as a result of participation in the PARCS program including physical fitness, improvements to mood and the creation of natural social support networks that facilitate on-going participation in fitness activities.

Themes were also evaluated by gender of the focus group participants but no substantial differences by gender were observed across the transcripts.

## Discussion

In this study, we examined student appraisals and conceptualization of a service learning course designed to pair undergraduate Kinesiology students with adult community members who attended PARCS fitness centers created through a partnership between the university and a public school system. Thematic analyses indicated that students: valued the service learning experience as relevant and preparatory for their future professional roles; gained experience in working with socioeconomic, ethnic and racial diverse populations that differed from their own backgrounds; and formed meaningful and emotionally rewarding relationships with clients. These findings are similar to those found by Coetzee et al (2011) where recreation students reported attaining competencies that supported their personal and professional development. Some of these attained competencies included: ability to communicate, planning and organizing, creativity, group dynamics, learning to work in a group, interpersonal skills, gaining knowledge to work with diverse populations, and working under pressure.

In addition to determining skills and competencies gained through service learning for future fitness professionals, this study is novel in that it identified student perspectives on factors influencing participation in a health-related service learning course. Students noted that positive peer experiences, proximity of the training sites to campus and compatibility with school, sport, extracurricular and work activities were factors in the location and extent to which they participated in the service learning course. The close proximity of PARCS locations to campus (<6 mile radius), and convenient hours (after 4pm Monday-Friday) appeared to increase student ability and willingness to participate by allowing them to fit this training experience into the tapestry of course work, athletic and work commitments within and beyond their academic major. These logistical considerations have a direct effect on the success of pedagogy for health promotion courses, just as they do for faculty, and merit careful consideration for planning courses that set students up for success both logistically and academically.

It is noteworthy that students expressed some trepidation about entering schools located in impoverished neighborhoods. Comments pertaining to anticipatory worries for personal safety and the degree of difference between these training environments and their familiar surroundings suggest that many students gained experience in socioeconomic environments that differed from their own and worked with clientele whose needs for fitness training are great but who are typically under-represented in commercial fitness facilities. Black (2002) expressed similar challenges in preparing physical therapy students to be culturally competent professionals and conducted a qualitative study to determine the effectiveness of a service learning experience in enhancing their cultural competence. Black interviewed 5 physical therapy students after completing the service learning program. Students expressed gaining cultural competencies and professional skills as a result of their service learning experience.

In the current study, students took a developmental approach in their description of their functioning over time indicating initial feelings of low self-confidence and recognition of gaps in their knowledge or skill sets and noting improvements in these areas and their

overall sense of self-efficacy as fitness instructors by the end of the training experience. Overall, the identified themes reflected a positive learning experience expressed by the students, and many are consistent with those of Village (2006) who interviewed six physical therapy faculty members with over 3 years of experience teaching service learning courses to identify the qualities of effective service learning in physical therapy education. This author identified institutional commitment, collaboration, meaningful service, and reflection as qualities of effective service learning programs.

Student critiques of the service learning experience centered on limitations of equipment and training site locations and hours, communication of expectations for the course prior to entry, concerns about the significant socioeconomic and health burdens of their clientele and desire to extend the availability of the program across a wider range of schools to reach a greater cross-section of community members. In short, students wanted more: more clients, more time with each client, more sites, and more equipment. Notably, students did not express rejection of the program or resentment for the course as a required element of their training. Indeed, many students indicated that their knowledge of the program in advance of participation was provided by fellow students who recommended the experience or who set positive expectations.

### Limitations

A limitation of this study is the modest sample size of participants in the student focus groups including the small male representation; however, this sample size is similar to other qualitative research evaluating service learning programs having fewer than 15 participants (Black, 2002; Village, 2006; Roper, 2014). Although a large number of students have been placed in PARCS (N = 40 from one class each semester in 2004 to N ~ 200 from multiple classes each semester in 2014), inclusion criteria required students were near or at the completion of their program. Many students who met the criteria were no longer affiliated with the university due to graduation at the time the focus groups were offered by the study. As a result, they could not be reached to elicit opinions. Students currently enrolled in the course who had not completed the semester were not extended invitations to protect confidentiality and reduce any student concerns about offering negative opinions about the course.

These procedural constraints had several consequences. On the one hand, they significantly limited the ability to recruit a larger number of students in the focus groups. On the other hand, the students who participated had recently completed their PARCS service learning course and were able to provide recollections that reflected the structure of the course as it was offered at that time. While it is possible that the students who chose to participate might be biased in favor of the course experience, it was evident in the focus group discussions that students offered a range of opinions and attitudes about their experience including critical appraisals of some aspects of the experience. As a result of this feedback, two new courses (*Exercise Leadership and Program Design* and *Physical Activity and Disease*) have been added to the Exercise Science and Fitness Studies curricula. Additionally, PARCS has partnered with an independent fitness center located in a low-income community. This

facility has low or no-cost memberships and is open 80 hours/week (60 of which are staffed by Kinesiology students).

For the past 10 years, the PARCS program has offered service learning opportunities in health promotion for Kinesiology majors. The program's long-term success in creating and maintaining community partnerships and consistent placement of students and staff has the potential to serve as a model for the development of similar programmatic partnerships for Kinesiology students, university faculty, health care providers, and community members nationwide. Evidence from student focus groups is consistent with student reflection papers and graduation exit interviews that this service learning experience positions students for successful work in physical fitness and graduate program placements in health-related fields. Indeed, internship sites and employers report preferring [name of university] Kinesiology graduates over students from other local programs because of their community-based service learning experiences. Recent graduates of this program have entered the health and fitness industry and graduate programs in clinical exercise physiology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, nursing and medicine. It is logical that students preparing for careers that involve health promotion should, as part of their undergraduate training, receive experience working with populations who have a wide range of physical fitness and physical conditions. For this reason, we believe that programs similar to PARCS should be developed and required for all Kinesiology programs just as physical education teacher education majors are required to work with students and nursing majors are required to work with patients.

In sum, this evaluation of student perceptions and construction of a service learning training program for Kinesiology majors demonstrated high levels of satisfaction, skill acquisition, engagement, emotional investment and significant personal and professional growth beyond what could be attained in the classroom setting. The themes derived from these data suggest the value of adequately preparing students for working with community members and designing programs that can be incorporated into student class schedules. The benefits of this type of training experience for students extends beyond the confines of an academic semester. Evaluation of these experiences is a necessary component to informing program design and adaptation to enhance outcomes for students, faculty and community partners.

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## Appendix A

### LANDSCAPE Study PARCS/Fit for Life Member Student Focus Group

#### Questions

##### Introduction

*Thank you for coming today. My name is RA will state his/her name. I am an [name of university] student and research assistant. You have been invited here today because you have completed a service learning course that sent students to the PARCS/Fit for Life program and you have agreed to participate in the LANDSCAPE study. Today, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the PARCS/Fit for Life program, exercise, diabetes and depression.*

*I would like to ask you, as a group, a series of questions about your experiences. Please know that I will be tape- recording our discussion to assist me in remembering what is said. The information that you share will be confidential and will only be shared with the immediate study leaders. No single person's contribution will be identified by name. I would like to ask that the opinions or stories shared by people in the group remain in the group as well.*

**Background Information—***Just to get started, I would like to ask each person to tell me your name and about how many times you participated in PARCS/Fit for Life program service learning activities.*

*I've also been asked to find out your gender, age, race, year of academic preparation, and number of times you attended PARCS so that we can compare the focus group participants with the general population of students. This information will be kept confidential and will only be reported as the types of students who attended the student focus groups. If you are willing to share this information, please complete the student demographic form. Please do NOT write your name or any other identifying information on the form.*

#### **Evaluation of PARCS/Fit for Life Program—**

1. How did you learn about the PARCS/Fit for Life program?
2. What helped you to decide to enroll in the service learning course?
3. Are there BENEFITS in performing PARCS/Fit for Life service learning activities?
4. Are there DISADVANTAGES in performing PARCS/Fit for Life service learning activities?
5. How important was the LOCATION of the PARCS/Fit for Life program in your decision to attend the program site that you attended? (Clarification: If the location was closer/farther away from campus or your home would that have influenced your decision?)
6. How important was the DAY AND TIME of the PARCS/Fit for Life program in your decision to attend the program site that you attended? (Clarification: If the program was offered earlier/later in the day or on a weekend would that have influenced your decision?)
7. How did you feel about coming to PARCS/Fit for Life site that you attended to do your service learning activities?
8. How did you feel about working with high school students/adult community members to help you apply concepts that you learned in class?
9. How did you feel about the number of hours you were required to attend the program?
10. Did other students/faculty members talked to you about the PARCS/Fit for Life program before you attended? If so, what did they say?
11. If you could change any part of the PARCS/Fit for Life program, what would it be?

**Health Disparities: Community Burden—**

1. How much does poor health affect this community?
2. Does exercise play a role in improving health? If so, what does it do?
3. What, if any, role could or should the PARCS/Fit for Life program play in addressing the burden of poor health in this community?
4. If you knew a friend or a family member with poor health and limited exercise options who wanted to exercise, would you recommend that they join the PARCS/Fit for Life program?

**Debriefing—***We should stop for today. Thank you for sharing your experiences on these important topics.*

**Table 1**

## Original vs. Final Themes

Original Themes	Final themes
Decision to Participate	Personal and Professional Experience
Logistics	Decision to Participate
Communication / Program Organization	Location Decision
Personal Comfort	Self-Efficacy
Impact on Learning / Professional Development	Perceptions of Participants
Perceptions of Participants	Social Interaction
Personal / Professional Experience	Personal and Program Communication
Physical Facility	Physical Facility
	Program Outcomes

**Table 2**

Themes and subthemes derived from undergraduate service learning students

**Personal and Professional Experience**

- Students gained real-life experience.
- Students were able to apply their knowledge.
- Students developed skills they are not able to in the classroom.

**Decision to Participate**

- Students participated in service-learning because it was a requirement.
- Students participated because peers had completed it.
- Students continued to volunteer after the met course requirements.

**Location Decision**

- Proximity to campus was important.
- Convenience to class and extracurricular activities was important.

**Self-Efficacy**

- Students had timid feelings working in unfamiliar environments.
- Students were hesitant working with at-risk populations.
- Students felt the experience built their confidence.

**Perceptions of Participants**

- Students felt program members had poor health.
- Students felt program members were of lower socioeconomic status.
- Students felt program members had limit knowledge of health and fitness.

**Social Interaction**

- Students learned how to build interpersonal relationships.
- Students felt the program built a sense of community.

**Personal and Program Communication**

- Students felt the service learning course lacked structure.
- Students felt there was a lack of communication preparing them for what to expect.
- Students felt marketing communication for recruitment and retention of program members was lacking.

**Physical Facility**

- Students felt there were a limited number of locations and hours of operation.
- Students felt the equipment was limited, but of decent quality.

**Program Outcomes**

- Students believed the exercise program helps improve the health of members.
- Students felt the exercise program provided resources that were otherwise lacking in the community.
- Students felt the program provided social support for members.